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ABSTRACT

Since the early nineteenth century, scholars have marveled at the unlettered Cherokee native named Sequoyah--or Sikwaya--and also known as John Guess--or Guest or Gist--who, unassisted, developed a medium for the written expression of the Cherokee language that was uniquely appropriate to the peculiarities of the spoken language. There is much uncertainty and disagreement among Sequoyah's biographers about the facts of his life. A controversial biography, "Tell Them They Lie: the Sequoyah Myth," by Traveller Bird is in disagreement with other published works in almost every particular. Sequoyah's date of birth, his parentage, his occupation, and the origin of his name are all disputed along with questions about how and why he invented the syllabary. Most authorities agree that the Cherokee syllabary, as invented by Sequoyah, was perfected in 1821 after 12 years' work and was successfully demonstrated at a trial by tribal authorities. Many sources describe the rapid acceptance of Sequoyah's syllabary by the Cherokee Nation, which began in 1828 to publish the "Cherokee Phoenix," a dual language newspaper in English and Cherokee. Sequoyah was honored for his invention by the Cherokee Nation in 1825 and by the United States government in 1828. (JHZ)

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SEQUOYAH AND THE CHEROKEE SYLLABARY

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SEQUOYAH AND THE CHEROKEE SYLLABARY

Written languages have, in the main, demonstrated a history of unhurried evolutionary development. Additionally, most writing has followed one of three general types: ideographic (as seen in Egyptian and Mayan hieroglyphics), alphabetic (as demonstrated in the Greek and Roman systems of writing), and syllabic, a type of writing related to phonics.

A writing system formulated upon the latter type but having no background of gradual maturation is the Cherokee syllabary, generally believed to have been the work of a single man. His lifetime witnessed the conception, development, and popular acceptance of a written language hitherto unknown. Such a process has taken millennia for other written languages. Since the early nineteenth century, scholars have universally marveled at the unlettered Cherokee native named Sequoyah (or Sikwaya) and also known as John Guess (or Guest, or Gist), who, unassisted, developed a medium for the written expression of the Cherokee language that was uniquely appropriate to the peculiarities of that spoken language.

A general uncertainty about Sequoyah's birth date and parentage find his birth variously dated from 1755 to 1775, and his heritage given either as full-blooded Cherokee or as half-blooded Anglo-Indian. All sources except Traveller Bird [1971] agree that the birth date is uncertain, but each advances his own scholarly speculations. Only Traveller Bird, who is in disagreement with other

authorities in almost every particular, maintains that Sequoyah was a full-blooded Native American; and only he dates the birth exactly as July, 1766 [1971:14,16].

Goodpasture [1921:123-124], Davis [1930:153-154], Williams [1937:10], Grant Foreman [1938:75-77], and Foster [1885] maintain a lively dispute as to the paternity of Sequoyah. Davis cites many sources who maintain "that Sequoyah's father was a Dutch or German peddler named Gist," and further states that "in the earlier accounts of Sequoyah his name is spelled Guyst or Guist, which spelling would indicate the German peddler theory of his ancestry is possibly correct." [1921:153-154] Goodpasture and his disciple, Grant Foreman, however, support the case for Nathaniel Gist, a British soldier/hunter. They make the somewhat unscholarly and jingoistic assumption that Sequoyah's genius precludes a "low adventurer" [Goodpasture 1921:123] or a "vagabond itinerant German" [G. Foreman 1938:75] for a father. Foreman goes so far as to state

> "that the amazing genius of this remarkable Indian must have been sired by a man of vastly superior qualifications is obvious....The father of Sequoyah could not have been the German clod whose existence is not even established, but must have been Nathaniel Gist, progenitor of many other distinguished Americans" [1938:75-76].

Traveller Bird, a Cherokee himself, maintains bitterly that Sequoyah's mixed blood heritage is conspiracy by missionaries and progressive Native American leaders who also manufactured the entire invention of the syllabary. His claim is that the mixed blood parentage is a public relations stunt to dupe the American masses into believing that "the Cherokees would never have had a syllabary

unless there was a little 'refined white' blood flowing around in Indian bodies" [1971:116].

None of these chauvinistic male writers, each advancing his own blatant jingoism, gives much credit to the fact that the Cherokee tribe is matrilineal. While all sources agree that Sequoyah's early home was with his mother, much more scholarly argument is expended on paternity than on the maternal environment. Traveller Bird would include a Cherokee warrior father in the home [ ], but Woodward [1963:87] and others state that Sequoyah lived a solitary life with his mother, who never (re)married. Davis describes their life together as basically agrarian, but supplemented by the proceeds from trading [1930:155-156]. Other sources dismiss Sequoyah's mother, whose name is variously given as Wut-teh, Wurteh, Lisi, or Betsy, as either "an Indian woman of good family" [Goodpasture 1921:123], or "a member of one of the leading Cherokee families, and not, therefore, likely to consort with a strolling peddler" [Williams 1937:11]. All sources, both Indian and non-Indian, are eager to protect the woman's reputation by claiming, without documentation, that she was married to the father of Sequoyah; but none credit her with influencing her son's genius. It is difficult to understand Sequoyah the man when scholars have misspent their efforts delving into possible hereditary influences to the almost complete neglect of any environmental persuasions during his lifetime.

Scholars are in no more accord about Sequoyah's occupation than they are about his paternity, although the answer to the former puzzle would have more relevance than would that of the latter.

Davis blithely states that "all authorities seem to agree...that Sequoyah became a clever silversmith, making various articles from...silver coins" [1930:156]. It is difficult to believe that coins were in plentiful enough supply to provide a livelihood. Woodward states also that Sequoyah was "trained to be a silversmith," but she also remarks that he "operated a salt-works on Lee's Creek" [1963:132,222]. Grant Foreman partially concurs, as his Sequoyah was a farmer who "at intervals when the larder ran low or inquiries from customers accumulated" [1938:30], gathered salt with the help of his wife and children. Traveller Bird, ever the maverick, would have us believe that Sequoyah was both a warrior and a scribe. He cites numerous incidents of Sequoyah's exploits as a hunter and warrior, explaining away the Indian's lame leg as another facet of missionary conspiracy [1971:26,117].

Sequoyah's very name is the subject of a three-way controversy that may be typified by the positions of Davis, Kilpatrick, and Traveller Bird. Davis states that the name Sequoyah was not uncommon among the Cherokees. He believes it to derive from "sikwa," meaning "hog" or "oppossum", plus the syllable "vi," a locator meaning "enclosure [1930:155-156]. Kilpatrick and Traveller Bird, both Cherokees, deny that Sequoyah is a Cherokee name. Traveller Bird dismisses the name as "fake," claiming that Sequoyah is a Taliwa tribal name and that Sequoyah's genuine name, by which he was known to the members of his tribe, was "Sogwili," meaning "horse" [1971:12]. Kilpatrick agrees that the name by which Sequoyah is most commonly known is not of Cherokee origin, but his suggested rationale for this discrepancy lacks Traveller Bird's vituperation:

"As any speaker of Cherokee will admit, Sequoyah's name

> appears to have no meaning at all; in fact, it emits a faintly foreign ring. Very possibly it is a borrowing, much garbled, from some American Indian language other than Cherokee" [1965a:5].

He further suggests that since the Cherokees were closely related to several other tribes--Tasgigi, Nottoway, Shawnee, Delaware, Iroquois, Yuchi, Creek, Natchez, and Catawba--borrowings from these or other languages was not unusual. An 1891 study by J. W. Powell treats Indian languages in terms of lexicography and lists the Cherokee language as one of thirteen offshoots of a North Iroquoian tribe known as Tuscarora [1966:155].

If the facts of Sequoyah's background and life are in dispute, much more agreement is found in the matter of his invention and development of the famous Cherokee syllabary. Two legends of Sequoyah's source of inspiration are found, and the two are not mutually contradictory. Both, however, show evidence of racism and an attitude of white supremacy that is repugnant to the modern mind. Wilkins quotes John Ridge, a distinguished Cherokee, a cousin and contemporary of Sequoyah:

> "He was a poor man...living in a retired part of the nation, and he told the head men one day that he could make a book. The chiefs replied it was impossible, because, they said the Great Spirit at first made a red and a white boy; to the red boy he gave a book, and the white boy a bow and arrow, but the white boy came round the red boy, stole his book, and went off, leaving him the bow and arrow, and therefore an Indian could not make

a book. But George Guess thought he could. He shut himself up to study" [1970:138-139].

However, Traveller Bird calls John Ridge a

> "fullblood white-educated traitor who had sold his soul to the white man for material wealth, social and political prestige....The government had trained the friendlies to turn their backs on their own people" [1971:93].

This mindset gives Traveller Bird the justification he needs to discredit every testimony or evidence not springing from sources militantly favorable to Indian culture.

Another legend of Sequoyah's inspiration to create a written language is dated 1809 by most sources. Davis recounts the story most concisely:

> "In the year 1809, the conversation in Sequoyah's [blacksmith] shop turned on the ability of the white man to send messages...by means of 'talking leaves.' The majority considered it to be the work of sorcerers,... a special gift,...[or] mere imposture. Sequoyah had listened in silence, but at length remarked...that the marks on paper stood for words....He believed he could invent a plan by means of which the Cherokees could talk on paper like the white man" [1930:159].

Ridicule followed this boast, but Sequoyah persisted. He first attempted to make a different mark for every word he could remember; but as he accumulated several thousand characters, this soon became unwieldy. Years he labored to devise a workable method of communication in his native tongue, while his farm was neglected, and his family largely ignored. The members of his tribe believed him to be

bewitched and continued their ridicule. He developed a "reputation for being, at best, a laughable crank, and, at worst, a dida:hnese:sg(i) (sorcerer)" [Kilpatrick 1965a:11]. So much was he feared that his wife burned his manuscripts whenever she could find them [___1970:139]. Grant Foreman quotes Sequoyah's son to the effect that the burning was done when "superstitious fellow countrymen became suspicious of him. Believing that he was engaged in some diabolical plan to destroy the nation they...burned up his cabin, hieroglyphics and all" [1938:47].

Although most sources agree that derision was Sequoyah's lot as he strove on his project, Davis believes this to be incorrect, as several records give a contradictory impression. Davis cites an 1816 treaty signed by U. S. Commissioners and fifteen important men of the Cherokee tribe; he remarks that Sequoyah "would hardly have been chosen to represent the Nation if he had been considered demented" [1930:160.] Kilpatrick counters by calling this action unpopular and traitorous, as the 1816 Treaty of Chicksaw Council House called for the Cherokees to relinquish sizeable land claims in western Alabama [1965:11].

The forms Sequoyah used for his syllabic symbols were taken from a combination of sources. All except Traveller Bird agree that Sequoyah could neither read nor speak English, but that he possessed an English language spelling book. Although he did not understand the symbols and their values, he adapted some of the characters to his syllabary. Other characters were of his own invention, a few derived from the Greek alphabet. His original syllabary had about 200 characters, but this number was reduced to eighty-six by the

elimination of near-repetitious and unnecessary sounds. Similarity to English characters may be seen in Chart I.

Chart II from Traveller Bird is very unlike the syllabary accepted by other authorities. Traveller Bird declaims the invention of the Cherokee syllabary by Sequoyah and states that the system of writing had been known for many years before Sequoyah's birth:

> "United with the great Appalachia confederacy during the fifteenth century, the tribe had created its own method of writing and reading, which was comparable to that of the white invaders. This symbol system had been used by the tribe for nine summers before European invasion on Gvanahani (San Salvador Island)" [1971:19].

Traveller Bird's allegation of a pre-Columbian syllabary and his claim that Sequoyah followed his Cherokee father in becoming a member of the ancient Seven Clan Scribe Society are mutually supportive. Traveller Bird further professes that the United States government had had knowledge of the Cherokee syllabary since 1791 and that a conspiracy of the government and the missionaries was formed to create

> "an episode in Cherokee history...to fit their purpose. They twisted the facts to fit the picture desired. They tagged their fake name 'Sequoyah,'...and made George Guess the helpful 'hero' to their civilization movement, knowing this Cherokee could do nothing about it" [1971:12-13].

Most authorities agree that the Cherokee syllabary, as invented by Sequoyah, was perfected in 1821, and was subjected to a

trial by tribal authorities, as "there was some suspicion of necromancy in the whole business" [G. Foreman 1938:25]. Davis and Foreman agree that Sequoyah successfully demonstrated his syllabary at this trial [Davis 1930:161; G. Foreman 1938:11,25], but Traveller Bird maintains that the Cherokee General Council convicted Sequoyah of witchcraft in 1816. The witchcraft charge, says Traveller Bird, is further evidence of conspiracy between half-blooded Cherokees and Anglo-Christians whose civilizing influence the Indians were resisting. He claims that

> "the syllabary had publicly been used since 1795 as a 'weapon' to block the 'great experiment' forced upon the Cherokees by the...government in order to control and civilize the Indians by the Anglo-American social standards" [1971:12-13].

Sequoyah and his wife were branded with circles on their foreheads and backs; and Sequoyah's fingertips and ears were cut off. This latter mutilation was the mark of a traitor [Traveller Bird 1971:13].

Jack Kilpatrick, also a Cherokee, and the second recipient after Sequoyah of a citation for cultural welfare given by the Cherokee nation, quotes a tribal document on the invention:

> "The Wahnenauhi Manuscript matter-of-factly states what happened: Many years Sequoyah dreamed, studied and worked until success crowned his efforts; and he presented to his people a methodically arranged alphabetical language, containing the eighty-six syllables of which the Cherokee language is composed. He first taught his Alphabet to

his little daughter, a girl of about ten years, afterwards he persuaded a few friends to hear it... Nearly every member of the Tribe became interested in the new movement, and learned to form the letters and to read and write. Sequoyah now became a most popular man, and was respected, as almost superhuman; for he was regarded as a great benefactor of his Nation" [Kilpatrick 1965a:11].

Prior to Sequoyah's invention, Moravian missionaries had established themselves among the Cherokees in an attempt to convert the Indians to Christianity through education. Some effort had been made to translate the gospels and a spelling book into the Cherokee language using Roman symbols, but this was unsuccessful because of the inadequacy of English language sounds for expressing Cherokee sounds [Davis 1930:163]. Althea Bass, biographer of Moravian missionary Samuel Austin Worchester, says:

"John Pickering of Boston set to work on an orthographic system, starting with the Cherokee language. David Brown, a young Cherokee who had recently been a student at Andover, had worked with Pickering before returning to the Indian country; they had constructed an alphabet and had begun the compilation of a grammar. The Prudential Committee of the American Board [of Commissioners for Foreign Missions] had appropriated $500 toward the publication of the Cherokee grammar when word reached Boston that the Cherokees had a system of writing of their own that was transforming the whole nation. They had burst into literacy, while the Board was perfecting a scheme to make them literate" [Bass 1936:34-35].

After the general acceptance of Sequoyah's syllabary, which Carolyn Foreman has called the "greatest civilizing influence ever given to a primitive race of people" [1936:xiv], a printing press was purchased by the Cherokee National Council to sate the new demand for reading matter in the native language. Sequoyah's syllabary is very easily learned by native speakers of Cherokee, but nearly impossible for English-speaking persons. Davis states that "within a few months a nation of Indians, called savages by their enemies, rose from a condition of...illiteracy to one of culture, unaided save by one man" [1930:161]. Tennessee Cherokees began to communicate with emigrants to Arkansas, where Sequoyah moved soon after Council approval of his syllabary.

When Samuel Worchester arrived in the Cherokee Nation in 1825, he found manuscript copies of the New Testament and St. John's Gospel in the new syllabary being passed about. Worchester was the moving force behind founding a press, as he was "instrumental in securing the approval of leading Cherokees for the casting of type in Boston in the Cherokee characters" [G. Foreman 1938:11-13]. It was not until 1828 that the press and type were received in New Echota, Georgia, the capital of the Cherokee Nation. Under the direction and editorship of Elias Boudinot, a Cherokee, the first issue of the Cherokee Phoenix, a dual language newspaper in English and Cherokee, came off the press on February 21, 1828, and continued publication until May 31, 1834 [C. Foreman 1936:xvi].

Appreciation of the benefits of Sequoyah's syllabary was expressed by the General Council of the Cherokee Nation, who voted in 1824 that a silver medal be struck and presented to Sequoyah for

his exceptional contribution to the cultural welfare of the Nation. The medal was completed in 1825, and was inscribed on one side:

> "'Presented to George Gist by the General Council of the Cherokee Nation, for his ingenuity in The Invention of the Cherokee Alphabet, 1825.' Under the inscription were two pipes crossed and...and the reverse...a head meant to represent George Gist himself" [G. Foreman 1938:8].

The United States government was somewhat slower about recognizing Sequoyah's invention. In 1828, Sequoyah and six other Cherokees visited Washington, D. C., to execute a treaty by which the Indians agreed to exchange their Alabama property for extensive lands in Oklahoma. Part of the treaty, which was signed by four of his tribesmen in Sequoyah's characters, granted to Sequoyah $500 in recognition of his invention, and to the Cherokee Nation $1,000 with which to establish a press in Oklahoma. Sequoyah, however, received only a portion of his grant; and the Indians received none of the subsidy on their western press [G. Foreman 1938:16-17].

A western successor to the Cherokee Phoenix was the Cherokee Advocate, a four-page weekly published from September, 1844, to September, 1853, and from April, 1870, to December, 1874 [C. Foreman 1936:77,80]. Today, however, few Cherokees can still speak or write their native language. Jack and Anna Kilpatrick. both Cherokee and she a descendent of Sequoyah, offer this sad commentary:

> "One reads over and over...that with astonishing rapidity Sequoyah's people became literate after his contribution was made available to them. Seldom in print is one reminded of the sad truth that Sequoyah's syllabary and the whooping crane stand in approximately the same rela-

tionship to oblivion....For one hundred years or so after achieving literacy the Cherokee people produced an enormous body of manuscript literature recording nearly every aspect of their culture, and it almost surpasses belief that no one, to our present knowledge, has made a serious attempt to preserve it....Today the average Cherokee cabin is likely to be devoid of a single scrap of Sequoyan as it is of a copy of Catullus" [1965b:vii-viii].

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# # #

CHART I

Cherokee Alphabet.

D a	R e	T i	Ô o	O u	i v
S ga O ka	F ge	Y gi	A go	J gu	E gv
V ha	P he	Ð hi	F ho	Γ hu	W hv
W la	6 le	P li	G lo	M lu	4 lv
5 ma	O me	H mi	3 mo	Y mu	
Θ na Ꮒ hna G nah	Λ ne	h ni	Z no	4 nu	O nv
T qua	Ω que	P qui	V quo	Ω quu	E qnv
U sa Ꭰ s	4 se	b si	F so	8 su	R sv
L da W la	S de T le	J di J li	Λ do	S du	O dv
Ꭰ dla C la	L le	C di	J do	V du	P dv
G tsa	V tse	K tsi	K tso	J tsu	C tsv
G wa	W we	O wi	O wo	9 wu	6 wv
Ꭷ ya	B ye	Ꮒ yi	Ꮆ yo	G yu	B yv

Sounds represented by Vowels.

a as *a* in *father*, or short as *a* in *rival*
e as *a* in *hate*, or short as *e* in *met*
i as *i* in *pique*, or short as *i* in *pit*
o, as *aw* in *law*, or short as *o* in *not*
u, as *oo* in *food*, or short as *u* in *pull*.
v, as *u* in *but*: nasalized.

Consonant Sounds

g nearly as in English, but approaching to *k*. *d* nearly as in English, but approaching to *t*. *h*, *l*, *m*, *n*, *s*, *w*, *y*, as in English. Syllables beginning with *g*, except *gh*, have sometimes the power of *k*. *s* &c. are sometimes sounded, to, do, tu and Syllables written with *a* accepted, sometimes vary to all.

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CHART II

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